

A STUDY ON THE UNGLORIFIED WOMEN FREEDOM FIGHTERS IN INDIA

J. Mekala Devi

Assistant Professor, Department of History, the Standard Fireworks Rajaratnam College for Women, Sivakasi, India

ABSTRACT

Women in ancient India occupied a dignified place. They participated in the outdoor life as circumstances and situations demanded and there were hardly any prescribed positions exclusively earmarked for men. All the high avenues of learning were open to women. Some of the customs which affected their contribution to Indian Nationalism were: infanticide, child marriage, conditions of widows, polygamy, offering girls to the deity and prejudice against women education. After a long struggle, they overcome these superstitious beliefs and got success in various fields. The history of Indian Freedom Movement would be incomplete without mentioning the contributions of women. The sacrifice made by the women of India will occupy the foremost place. They fought with true spirit and undaunted courage and faced various tortures, exploitations and hardships to earn freedom. When most of the men freedom fighters were in prison, the women came forward and took charge of the struggle. Tamil Nadu has a great tradition of heritage and culture that has developed over 2000 years and still continues to flourish. British men considered India as market to sell their business product. So, from the beginning itself their aim was exploiting the Indian economy whenever economic dullness happened, they dumped their Goods in India and sold it in later days they introduced many changes. More than the Indian Kings to eradicate misbelief and women freedom. In the British period the education of women was encouraged and this resulted change in the position of women the educated women rise the voice against British domination and entered into the freedom struggle. Some of the women lost their money, Jewels, home, etc., All the top leaders were arrested, but thousands of common people with the inspiring slogan Karange ye Marange – Do or Die came forward. In some cases, they gave a strong shoulder to men fighters. They were very brave and courage. Number of women participated in the freedom struggle of India and very few we came to know. Numerous unknown women fighters and their efforts were hidden. We should bring out their participation too to all. Now we are breathing a free air because of their lost breath for our freedom. We should salute the effort taken by the women warriors and their success in freedom.

Women Who Were Also Part of the Freedom Struggle, But May Not Feature in All Our History Books.

KEYWORDS: *Women Freedom Fighters, Struggles, Boldness, Warfare, Independence*

Article History

Received: 02 Dec 2020 | Revised: 07 Dec 2020 | Accepted: 10 Dec 2020

INTRODUCTION

India needs to dearly hold sacred its independence. For generations, the cloak of the British Rule that had grappled, sometimes with force, sometimes with injustice the very essence of freedom that is the basic right of every individual citizen, was thrown over after many attempts. And hence the Independence of this nation was won in ways and by its

people in unprecedented ways. Men of honour had a significant role to play in the freedom struggle. However, surprisingly women led from the front and emerged as game-changers in the quest for independence. The history of the Indian Struggle would be incomplete without mentioning the contributions of women. The sacrifice made by the women of India will occupy the foremost place. When most of the men freedom fighters were in prison, the women came forward and took charge of the struggle. They fought with true spirit and unafraid courage and faced various tortures, exploitations, and hardships to earn us freedom. When most of the men freedom fighters were in prison, the women came forward and took charge of the struggle. The list of great women whose names have gone down in history for their dedication and undying devotion to the service of India is a long one. Indian women who joined the national movement belonged to educated and liberal families, as well as those from the rural areas and from all walk of life, all castes, religions and communities.

Ahead of 1857

Women leaders made a significant mark of their valour and will as early as in the 18 century and set the stage for emphasizing that women were in no way willing to be relegated to the backdrop of the freedom struggle. Maharani Velu Nachiyar (1730 – 1796) bravely fought with the British army decades before the 1857 Revolt. She probably remains the only queen to have defeated the British army successfully. Gauri Parvati Bai who was queen of Travancore carried out reforms and emphasized on the need for education of girls thus in many ways helping women elevate from social and educational stigma.

Bhima Bai Holkar: The first woman to wield a sword against the British (Indore)

Bhima Bai Holkar is said to be the first woman who wielded her sword against the Britishers. She is widely believed to have inspired the queen of Jhansi Lakshmi Bai to fight against British oppression. She was born on September 17, 1795; she was the granddaughter of illustrious queen Ahilya Bai Holkar and daughter of Yashwant Rao Holkar, Maharaja of Indore. Since Indore estate, ruled by Holkars, was an affluent Kingdom, Britishers were lurking their eyes on it. It was no coincidence that she was named Bhima due to her indomitable boldness. She was well versed in all warfares but excelled in Guerrilla warfare.

Kittur Rani Chennamma: India's Valiant Freedom Fighter (Karnataka) [1778 – 1829]

Kittur Rani Chennamma was the Queen of Kittur, was one of the women's independence activists of Bharat. She stood all alone with a vibrant fiery age against the British empire. She was Chennamma, Queen of the Princely State Kittur in Karnataka. Rani Chennamma was born in Karnataka (a small village in the North of Belgaum in Karnataka). In 1778, Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi from a very young age she received training in horse riding, sword fighting, and archery. Rani Chennamma was married to Mallasarja Desai, the ruler of Kittur at the age of 15. Her married life seemed to be a sad tale after her husband died in 1816.

The Doctrine of Lapse was imposed on native states by the British. British did not allow native rulers and adopted child and their own children also. Their territory came under the control of the British automatically. The State of Kittur came under the administration of the Dharwad collectorate in charge of Mr. Thackeray. Mr. Chaplin was the commissioner of the region. Rani Chennamma and local people strongly opposed the British high-handedness. Thackeray invaded Kittur in a battle that ensured hundreds of British soldiers killed along with Thackeray. They brought bigger armies from Mysore and Sholapur and surrounded Kittur. Rani Chennamma tried her best to avoid war. She negotiated with Chaplin and the Governor of Bombay Presidency under whose regime Kittur fell. Chennamma committed to declaring war for 12 days. The

valiant Queen and her soldiers defend their fort but as is the common trait, traitors sneaked in and mixed mud and dung in the gunpowder in the canons. Rani was defeated in 1824 A.D. She was taken in prison and kept in the fort of Bailhongal till life. Since 1824, 'Kittur Utsava' has been organized every year in the month of October to celebrate the heroic rebellion of Rani Kittur Chennamma.

SARALA DEVI CHAUDHURANI

She was the granddaughter of Debendranath Tagore. In 1890, she earned her BA in English literature from Bethune College. She was awarded the college's first Padmavati Gold Medal for being the top female candidate in her BA examinations.^[2] She was one of the few women of her time to participate in the Indian independence movement. During anti partition agitation she spread the gospel of nationalism in Punjab and maintained secret revolutionary society. Her husband Rambhuj Dutt Chaudhary was a lawyer, journalist, nationalist leader and follower of Arya Samaj, the Hindu reform movement founded by Swami Dayananda Saraswati. After her marriage, she moved to Punjab and helped her husband edit the nationalist Urdu weekly *Hindustan*, Later; it was converted into an English periodical. When her husband was arrested for his involvement in Non-cooperation movement, Mahatma Gandhi visited her home in Lahore as a guest; and Gandhi fell for her. Gandhi-Sarala Debi became a talk-of-the-town in Lahore on the account of their closeness. Gandhi lapped up her poems and writings, and used them in his speeches, and in *Young India* and other journals. She travelled with him all over India. When apart, they frequently exchanged letters. According to Rabindra Bharati University Vice-Chancellor Professor Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury, the relationship between the two, although close, was nothing more than mutual admiration.^[8] Her only son, Dipak, married Gandhi's granddaughter Radha.

Rani Begum Hazrat Mahal –A Revolutionary Queen (Avadh)

The Begum ruled the largest area of rebel land, commanded the most significant rebel force of the war and held out the longest against the British. On March 6, 1858, led by the British Commander-in-Chief, Colin Campbell, thousands of British troops – English, Scottish, Sikh, Bengali and even Nepali – began the final assault of the ancient city of Lucknow. Apple of the eyes of successive Nawabs, the city was packed with walled baghs, palaces, mosques, tombs and densely-built homes. Many of these beautiful gardens, mosques and palaces were now in ruins. Some places like the Secundra Bagh – stormed by Highlanders on November 6, 1857 – were still filled with the bodies of hundreds of slain rebel sepoys. The surviving rebels and defenders, remnants of revolting sepoy units from across North India, ordinary residents of the city and the soldiers and mercenaries from surrounding areas, fought that day as desperately as they had ever done, since the heady days of June 30, 1857, when they had taken the city and besieged the British garrison in their Residency. Sadly, it would all end in tragedy. Delhi and Kanpur had already fallen to the British. Armies were marching towards Jhansi and Gwalior. And wild and chaotic Lucknow could not hold out for long. By March 21, it was all over. The British had won a great many things that summer. Great lands and cities, unimaginable looted wealth and an empire. But of the many jewels of India they despoiled in those fiery months, there would be one they would never claim, tame or diminish. She was called Begum Hazrat Mahal.

Hazrat Mahal's life was a little different from scores of such begums. Indeed, the Nawab himself later divorced her, as other wives entered his life. But the turning point for Awadh and the Begum came in 1856 when the East India Company annexed the state of Awadh. At the time, to whitewash their theft and naked greed, the British invented several reasons. But the reality was simple enough – Lord Dalhousie had a big army and wanted to conquer as much land as he could. Awadh had been annexed in February of 1856, along with many other such states. The annexation by itself was

simple. By that time, Awadh's army was supine, and the Nawab agreed to be pensioned off to Calcutta. He soon left for the city, arriving there in May 1856 with a large entourage, many animals and cooks. He would spend the rest of his days in Calcutta, building a 'mini Lucknow' in exile. But Hazrat Mahal and her son were not part of that entourage. A bold, and charismatic politician, she still believed in fighting for the rights of her son, and Awadh. And she had the support of influential courtiers and leaders, and the people. Resentment was building among millions of ordinary citizens, and more seriously, among the tens of thousands of 'sepoys' or 'sipahis' – Indians who had joined the British army to fight for them. Primed by the brazen behaviour of the British, the bonfire was waiting for a spark.

The spark came from Meerut, where the sepoy Mangal Pandey refused to use the new cartridges issued for his rifle. Though few rallied to his cause on March 29, 1857, and he was hanged, the revolt quickly spread – from Meerut to Kanpur to Delhi. It arrived in the form of thousands of rebel sepoys to Awadh by June. Hazrat Mahal and her supporters, including the local nobility of Awadh, had been relatively quiet till then. But seizing the opportunity, they quickly organised themselves and overthrew British authority in the state. This was done with the support of the local landowners, the nobility and even ordinary peasants, who flocked to the begum's banner – a move that perhaps surprised those who had thought that the fighting spirit of Awadh was at an end. On June 5, Hazrat Mahal crowned her son, Birjis Qadar, then either 12 or 14, as the rightful ruler of Awadh and Raja Jai Lal was appointed as military commander. The battle of Chinhat, fought amidst a mango grove on June 30, 1857, in what was then a small village outside Lucknow, set matters in stone. The British were roundly beaten and forced to retreat to their fortified Residency inside Lucknow. Awadh was officially free of British rule from that day. William Howard Russell's much-quoted line from *My Indian Mutiny Diary* sums up his feelings at the time – "This Begam exhibits great energy and ability. She has excited all Oudh to take up the interests of her son, and the chiefs have sworn to be faithful to him. The Begum declares undying war against us." For ten months from then, Hazrat Mahal took control of affairs as her son's regent. Not only was she backed by her supporters, but the ordinary Awadhi and even the last Mughal – Bahadur Shah Jafar – recognised her rule all the way from Delhi. She would prove to be a popular administrator and a host of eyewitness accounts, both Indian and British, testify that the Begum was not shy of battle, either. Many accounts recall her going from camp to camp, to raise morale through her fiery speeches and her presence in various battles. An 1858 edition of *The Times* in London stated, "The Begum of Awadh shows greater strategic sense and courage than all her generals put together." High praise indeed. To take yet another example, many British accounts of the battle of Musa Bagh in Lucknow, noted that the Begum was personally present, fighting and rallying the 9,000 or so rebels who fought there. She was sometimes seen riding an elephant in battle as well. Over a 150 years later, it is hard, to sum up her leadership and inspiration. But to give modern readers some idea – at the time, the Begum ruled the largest area of rebel land, commanded the most significant rebel force of the war and held out the longest against the British, who would eventually bring to bear formidable imperial forces to crush Lucknow. Many things worked against her – the disunity among the rebels being the chief cause. The British had one commander, with one goal – defeat each rebel force before turning to the next. They had unbroken supply lines, modern technology and vastly more money and material. They also had the help of many Indian kingdoms and even Nepal.

The Begum had her own will, minimal supplies, disjointed allies and ultimately, not enough firepower. By March 18, 1858, the fall of Lucknow was inevitable. The British had made earlier offers to the begum – a pension, rule under the British and mercy. But the Begum had rejected them all. It was all or nothing for her. And that would be the case till the end. She slipped out of Lucknow before the end, making her way to the Himalayan forests in the North, fighting bitterly at every step against pursuing the British, before finally seeking refuge in Nepal. The British protested, but the Nepali ruler

refused to hand her over. They offered her a pension to return to Lucknow as their regent – she spurned the offer. For 16 years, Hazrat Mahal would live in Kathmandu, slowly losing all her wealth. But she refused to come back in surrender. When she died, on April 7, 1879, there was no money even for a grave. She rests in a small grave in an encroached corner of the Jama Masjid in Kathmandu to this day – undefeated to the end. In some small relief, her son, Birjis Qadar, was allowed to return with a pardon after she died.

Mata Bhag Kaur

Only daughter of a prominent landowner of a village in the present-day Amritsar, Mai Bhago came to become a great warrior who led a group of 40 Sikh warriors against the 10,000 strong Mughal army in the Battle of Muktsar in 1705. Later, she even served as a bodyguard to Guru Gobind Singh during his exile in Maharashtra.

Onake Obavva

Obavva was not a princess, but the wife of a guard at Chitra Durga Fort.

Down in southern India, Haider Ali, Sultan and de facto ruler of the Kingdom of Mysore, was trying to conquer Chitra Durga but found no success even after numerous attempts. One day, the Sultan noticed a woman trying to enter the fort through a hole. He ordered his men to use the same way to enter and conquer the fort. Obavva noticed the activity and since her husband was away for lunch, she decided to take matters into her own hands.

She guarded the crevice, making sure that no one enters the fort. By the end of it all, Obavva had killed almost 100 men.

Belawadi Mallamma

The first woman to form a women's army, Belawadi Mallamma was born to Sode king Madhu Linga Nayaka and was the wife of Prince Isaprabhu. During a war between her kingdom and the Maratha empire, her husband was killed. Mallamma picked up the sword fought with her army to save her kingdom. She was, however, captured. Later, Chatrapati Shivaji released her after seeing her bravery.

Abbakka Rani

Rani Abbakka from Chowta dynasty ruled a small coastal town called Ullal, 8 km away from Mangalore. During her reign, the Portuguese wanted to conquer the coastal town and use it as a port. They made their first attempt in 1525. But Rani Abbakka resisted and fought fiercely against the Portuguese, gaining the name Rani Abhaya (fearless queen).

Bhikaiji Cama - Madame Cama,

Bhikaiji Cama, the mother of Indian revolution also known as **Madame Cama**. She was the first woman who successfully unfurled the first version of the tricolour Indian flag.

She was born in September 24, 1861, Bombay, India. She was an Indian political activist. She advocated for women's rights that had the unique distinction of unfurling the first version of the Indian national flag—a tricolour of green, saffron, and red stripes—at the International Socialist Congress held at Stuttgart, Germany, in 1907. She was drawn toward political issues at an early age. She married Rustomji Cama (lawyer) but her involvement with socio-political issues led to differences between the couple. Because of marital problems and her poor health, she needs medical attention. So she left India and went to London. There she met Dadabhai Naoroji, a strong critic of British economic policy in India, and

began working for the Indian National Congress. Cama also came in contact with other Indian nationalists, including Vir Savarkar, Lala Har Dayal, and Shyamji Krishna Varma, and addressed several meetings in London's Hyde Park. After the 1907 conference in Stuttgart, Cama traveled abroad on an extended lecture tour to mobilize public opinion against British rule in India, especially among expatriate Indians; she also spoke in favour of women's rights. When rumors began that she would be deported from England, she moved in 1909 to Paris, where her home became a headquarters for those agitating for Indian independence. She helped Har Dayal launch his revolutionary paper *Bande Mataram*, copies of which were smuggled into India from London. For three years during World War I, after Great Britain and France became allies, the French authorities interned her for her anti-British activities. She maintained active contacts with Indian, Irish, and Egyptian revolutionaries and liaised with French Socialists and Russian leadership. In 1935, at the age of 75, she was allowed to return to India, and she died the same year.

USHA MEHTA

She was born in Gujarat. At the age of 5, he got a chance to visit Gandhi in his Ashram at Ahmedabad. In 1928, at the age of 18, she participated in a protest march against the Simon Commission. She shouted her first words against the British "Simon Go Back". As her father was a Judge under the British Raj, he did not encourage her to participate in such actions. But this limitation was removed when her father retired in 1930. In 1932, her family moved to Member. This was the greatest chance for her to participate in freedom movement. She and other children distributed the clandestine bulletins and publications, they went to meet their relatives in prison, there too they transferred the messages to the prisoners. She was highly influenced by Gandhi and became one of his followers. she emerged as a prominent proponent of Gandhian thought and philosophy. In 1942, Usha and her close associates began the Secret Congress Radio, a clandestine radio station. It went air on 27 August. The first words broadcast in her voice were: "This is the Congress radio calling on [a wavelength of] 42.34 meters from somewhere in India." Her associates included Vithalbhai Jhaveri, Chandrakant Jhaveri, Babubhai Thakkar and Nanka Motwani, owner of Chicago Radio, who supplied equipment and provided technicians. Many other leaders, including Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia, Achyut Rao Patwardhan and Purushottam Trikamdass, also assisted the Secret Congress Radio. The radio broadcast recorded messages from Gandhi and other prominent leaders across India. To elude the authorities, the organizers moved the station's location almost daily. The police found them on 12 November 1942 and arrested the organizers, including Usha Mehta. All were later imprisoned.

The Criminal Investigation Department (CID), a wing of the Indian Police, interrogated her for six months. During this time, she was held in solitary confinement and offered inducements such as the opportunity to study abroad if she would betray the movement. However, she chose to remain silent and, during her trials, asked the Judge of the High Court whether she was required to answer the questions. When the judge confirmed that she was not mandatory, she declared that she would not reply to any of the questions, not even to save herself. After the trial, she was sentenced to four years' imprisonment (1942 to 1946). Two of her associates were also convicted. Usha was imprisoned at Yeravda Jail in Pune. Her health deteriorated and she was sent to Bombay for treatment at Sir J. J. Hospital. In the hospital, three to four policemen kept a round-the-clock watch on her to prevent her from escaping. When her health improved, she was returned to Yeravda Jail. In March 1946, she was released, the first political prisoner to be released in Bombay, at the orders of Morarji Desai, who was at that time the home minister in the interim government. Although the Secret Congress Radio functioned only for three months, it greatly assisted the movement by disseminating uncensored news and other information banned by the British-controlled government of India. Secret Congress Radio also kept the leaders of the freedom movement in touch with the public. Reminiscing about those days, Usha Mehta described her involvement with

the Secret Congress Radio as her "finest moment" and also as her saddest moment, because an Indian technician had betrayed them to the authorities.

HANSHA MEHTA

She was an activist, a writer and the Parliamentarian. When she was on the UN committee, she took an effort to draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. She worked to promote education for girls, She was appointed to the board of the Bombay Municipality School Committee. She was the dean of Bombay's prestigious King Edward Memorial Hospital. Mehta played an active role in Civil Disobedience Movement. On the advice of Gandhiji, Hansha led the First Batch of Women group to fight against the British. In Sathyagraha, she participated to reject the foreign clothes and goods. In 1932, she was made vice-president of the Harijan Sewak Sangh, which was trying to make peace between Gandhiji and Ambedkar. She was appointed as the Parliamentary Secretary. In 1946, she served as the President of All India Women's Conference. In 1947, she was appointed as the Indian delegate of United Nations Commission on Human Rights.

The struggle for freedom in India is one of the liberative movements in the World, Women in freedom struggle of the country have contributed significantly. Indian women actively participated in the revolution and movement for social change during the national struggle for independence. Thus, the participation of women was not restricted to a particular type of activity such as non-violent satyagraha movement. Women's early contribution to the Indian National Movement started in the late in the 19th Century with Women's involvement in the Indian National Congress. Ever since the formation of the Indian National Congress 1885, the participation of women and their activities grew slowly but steadily and the Indian people got a platform to express that grievance against the British. During the time of freedom movement in India, Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, Sarojini Naidu, Kasturba, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Rukmini Lakshmi pathi, Ammu Swaminathan and others struggled and fought vigorously for getting independence of our country.

REFERENCES

1. *S.Ganesan, Viduthalai Poril Madurain Pangu (Tamil), Shunmugam Publishers.*
2. *Manmohan Kaur, Women in India's Freedom Struggle, New Delhi, 19852. The Hindu, Chennai August 14, 2013.*
3. *Who's who of Freedom fighters (Tamil Nadu) Vol-I (1973) Printed by Director of Stationary, Madras.*
4. *Manmohan Kaur, "Women in India's Freedom Struggle", 3rd Edition: 1992, Sterling Publisher Private Limited L-10, Green Park Extension, New Delhi.*
5. *K. Kalyana Sundari, M.A., M.Phil, "Role of Women in the Freedom Movement of Tamilnadu, 2004. School of Historical Studies Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai.*
6. *Prof. Bhanumathi Dharmarajan,VaralaaruPadaitha Vaira Mangayar, December 2010, Pudhugai Thenral Veliyeedu, Vadapalani, Chennai.*
7. *T. Stalin Kunasekaran, Viduthalai VelviyalThamilagam, Niveditha Publishing 78, SoutStreet, Manikkampalayam. Veerappansathiram, Erode.*
8. *"Tamil Nadu to build memorial for freedom fighter Kuyili" Times of India. Chennai, India. 16 May 2013.*
9. *"Veeramangai Velu Nachiyar. The Hindu Business Line. 18 January 2019, Chennai, India.*

10. "Remembering Queen Velu Nachiyar of Sivagangai, the first queen to fight the British. *The News Minute*. 3 January 2017.
11. Usha Mehta, the secret Congress radiowoman". Rediff.com. 27 June 1997. Retrieved 29 October 2018.
12. Padma Awards Directory (1954-2013), Ministry of Home Affairs (Public Section), Government of India, 14 August 2013.
13. Namboodiri pad, E.M.S., *A History of Indian Freedom Struggle*, Social Scientist Press, Trivandrum, (India), 1986.
14. Griffiths, Perelval — *The British impact on India*, London, 1952. Guha, N. '— *Banglaya Viplavbad*, Calcutta, 1923.
15. Kaur, Amrit — *Challenge to Women*, Allahabad, 1946.
16. *The fiery Indian student who ran a secret radio station for independence*, BBC News, 15 August 2020.
17. Nitish R. Roy, *Hundred Years of Freedom Struggle 1847-1947*, Biplabi Niketan Publishers, Calcutta, 1991.
18. Romila Thapar, *The History of the Female Emancipation in Southern Asia*, UNESCO, Paris, 1963.
19. Kanji Dwarkadas, *India's Fight for freedom 1913-1937 (An Eyewitness Story)*, Pop
20. Majumdar, B.C. — *History of Freedom Movement in India*, 3 vols, Calcutta, 1964.